Material religion in comparative perspective : how different is BCE from CE?

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Imagining the Divine: Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity across Eurasia

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Chapter 9
Material Religion in Comparative Perspective: How Different is BCE from CE?

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This chapter seeks to question a hiatus existing in the historical study of religion\s between two fields, one concerned with 'ancient', the other with 'late ancient' or 'post-ancient' religion\s.[1] The distinction between the two is often typological rather than simply chronological. The chronological threshold labelled 'BCE' and 'CE' has of course no immediate relevance for many of the European or Asian societies addressed in this book. Yet it seems that the typological divide of 'ancient' vs 'late' or 'post-ancient' religion is epistemologically related to that threshold, since early Christianity (*the* CE religious formation *par excellence*) often serves as the major paradigm for 'post-ancient' religions. I suggest that scholars should question the threshold as well as its enduring epistemological impact and be as careful in studying continuities as they are in stressing differences between earlier and later forms of ancient religion.[2]

Studies of earlier and later ancient religion are generally carried out by scholars working in distinct disciplines, who rarely come together at conferences or interdisciplinary venues, and accordingly the curricula of students of early or late ancient religion rarely intersect. The perception of a deep hiatus between earlier or later forms of religion is largely rooted in this institutional status quo. Can method and theory, and particularly a strong focus on material and visual religion, help us to bridge the gap between the two fields?

My contribution takes the form of two sections. I shall first summarise the distinction sometimes made by historians of religion regarding two putatively distinct types of religion: on the one side, 'primary', 'locative' or 'ancient' religion; on the other, 'secondary', 'utopian' or 'post-ancient' religion. Such distinctions may help scholars conceptualise important issues; but they can also be misleading, since history rarely supports dichotomies. I will suggest that studying material and visual religion might bring discontinuity and continuities between BCE and CE religion in better balance. The second section will turn to data and summarise insights of a study on ancient 'Canaanite' and 'Israelite' religion which I co-authored with Othmar Keel many years ago.[3] That study focused almost exclusively on material and visual data (occasionally supplemented by epigraphic data); biblical texts were put between parentheses for methodological reasons. This option allowed us to highlight changes in the regional history of religion which text-based studies had never (or not as clearly) noticed before. More than 25 years later, some of our interpretations are necessarily dated or have proven wrong; but many remain, and the methodological option seems not to have been disproved. Looking back at that study with hindsight will allow me to reflect critically upon the place of material and visual culture in the study of religion. I shall argue that an approach based on material and visual culture is profitable to the study of late antique religion\s and, indeed, religion any time anywhere.[4] An exclusive reliance on textual data (much of it 'theological' discourse of elites) distorts the historian's perception of ancient religion, whether BCE or CE, as much as it would do in an anthropologist's or sociologist's study of contemporary religion. Studying religion in terms of artefact-related practices, a material and visual religion approach, can supplement and occasionally correct more conventional

text-based approaches. BCE religion and CE religion\s may differ in many ways from each other; but a consistent methodological agenda taking material entanglements and visual concerns as seriously as literary or theological discourse may help to better assess the difference itself.

The wider theoretical issue: 'ancient' vs 'post-ancient' religion?

Influential voices in the academic study of religion\s have over the past 30 years suggested a number of categorical distinctions between what they consider to reflect two fundamentally different types of religion. Type 1 religion ('T1') can be conceptualised sociologically (following Émile Durkheim) as the collective projection of a given society, well localised in space and time, its value system, hierarchy and power allotments. Rooted in local tradition, custom and habit, T1 conceives non-obvious agents in terms of a meta-social system (a kinship group, a royal household or the like) that often mirrors the social structure of local society, without copying it altogether – the non-obvious is easily granted more latitude and may transcend some of the contingencies and strictures limiting human action. Since the system reflects and seeks to manage a reality full of tensions, threats and unresolved suffering, opponent figures are thought to exist among the non-obvious entities; but they do not, in the final run, question nor undermine the assumed relative order of cosmos and society. The local collective celebrates its cohesion as a society and indeed community in rituals legitimising and stabilising the social and metaphysical regime. T1 is often construed as fully coextensive with social convention, if not 'locally common-sense' altogether; as such it is transmitted and inherited from one generation to the next without too much questioning. If the fabric of a local society is complex, differentiated and hierarchised, T1 will not only run different spaces of residence and interaction (temples) for different deities but will also accommodate cults which need not be equally binding for all members of society; however, such subsets do not generally contest the legitimacy of others.

Type 2 religion ('T2') is characterised by scholars as fundamentally optional and oppositional, based on conviction and conversion, a choice to become a member in an elective community and to adopt belief in the truth of this group's particular myth and its superior potential for salvation. T2 is said to occur historically in the form of different, often rival religions (plural), which generally evolve in competition, each contesting the others' claims to ultimate truth or soteriological capacity. T2 religions are often construed (homogenised) by scholars as '-isms' (such as Buddhism, Judaism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism),[5] '-ity' (Christianity) or (in German) an essentialised '-tum' (Christentum, Judentum).[6] This does not rule out their historic segmentation, fragmentation and differentiation into various sub-options, sects or 'heresies' (in the etymological sense of 'options'); on the contrary, the very production of heresies and a dynamic of centrifugal fragmentation vs centripetal disciplining is a systemic characteristic of T2 religions, especially when they are highly institutionalised and can rely on a state apparatus. While the invention of T2 has been attributed by some to early Judaism (note Jan Assmann's concept of the 'Mosaic distinction', which has not gone uncontested)[7] most scholars draw on Christianity (their views and assumptions about Christianity), and to a lesser extent on Buddhism and on Manichaeism, when characterising T2.[8]

Scholars have theorised the distinction, and indeed the difference between the two types,[9] by a number of characteristics and qualifying adjectives, some of which are listed in **Table 1**. The final column points to basic theoretical implications of the word-pairs mentioned in the first two columns. The table combines categorisations by many different authors; such a list has never, to my knowledge and perhaps for good reasons, been drawn up in such a detailed manner. Each entry would require extensive discussion and refinement, first to credit those authors who have suggested appropriate terminology, second to do justice to those who have refined or criticised the typology or elaborated on a particular concept, and third to introduce nuances and to question the overall presentation's manifest simplicity. Further lines and criteria could be added to characterise differences between two types of religion; but I should point out that scholars generally draw on some criteria only (depending on their particular focus and interest) when discussing them.

The neat typological distinction presented in **Table 1** may, to some, look attractive and compelling at first sight: wouldn't it be tempting to correlate T1 religion with classical antiquity (that is, BCE broadly speaking) and T2 religions with late antiquity? On the other hand, once you compile a list of this kind, you become easily aware of the difficulty of applying the abstract typology to historically documented social formations (such as particular 'religions'). Each line added will increase this difficulty exponentially, to the effect that one starts to question the typology as such. This is precisely what I intend to do here, being convinced that historians of religion should resist the fallacies of binary typology.

Let me briefly comment on the first two distinctions, which have made an impact on the field because they were coined or used by well-recognised authorities.

'Primary' vs 'secondary' religion?

The distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' religion (or primary vs secondary 'religious experience'; no. 1 in **Table 1**) was suggested in the late 1970s by Theo Sundermeier, then professor of Christian mission studies at the University of Heidelberg. It is based on Sundermeier's observation of a hiatus and mismatch between African traditional, village- or tribe-based religion on the one hand, and 'world religions' imported from the north and east by Christian and Muslim conquerors and missionaries on the other hand. The latter claimed undivided truth for their doctrines, rejected local religion as pagan idolatry, and promised salvation to people whose world-view was neither prepared nor searching for such an offer.[10] Sundermeier's distinction was soon picked up by his then Heidelberg colleague, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, who first applied it to conceptualise the profound transformation introduced in ancient Egyptian religion by King Akhenaten's (Amenophis IV's) 'monotheist' exclusive cult of Aton (the deified sun-disc). In a later, broader move, Assmann

Type 1 religion	Type 2 religion\s		Comments on emphasis and theoretical implications
primary	secondary	1	temporal sequence (primordial vs subsequent, earlier vs later)
locative	utopian	2	spatial metaphor (here vs there)
embedded	disembedded	3	relation to context (structure vs agency)
world-affirming	world-negating	4	relation to social context (II)
immanentist	transcendentalist	5	cosmological focus
local	transregional, transportable	6	emphasis on (im)mobility (static vs dynamic and adaptive, potentially global)
particular	universalist	7	relevance and claimed validity
traditional	revealed	8	origin and authority of significant knowledge (conjunctive vs disjunctive)
oral, practical, material performance	text-based, scripturalised	9	media and authority, skills required to access relevant knowledge
cumulative or transient	selective, canonical, persistent	10	mode of cultural and religious capitalisation
sacrifice, cult	scripture, prayer, symbol	11	preferred media for ritual communication and value reproduction
imagistic	doctrinal	12	modes of religiosity
material mediation	mediation inside the human subject	13	mode of mediation
habitus (*praxis*)	belief (*doxa*)	14	mode of appropriation
collective (external) effervescence	inner experience	15	primary site of experience
acquired	optional, elective	16	subject position
socialisation	conversion	17	implicit appropriation vs actively reflexive commitment
civitas, ethnos	religious community	18	emphasis on belonging
descent	elective group membership	19	criterion for participation
inclusive	exclusive	20	dominant mode of boundary-making and group designation (being part of all vs significant others)
social integration	salvation	21	most valuable good promised
cosmotheism, polytheisms	monotheism	22	basic theological frame
'ancient'	'post-ancient'	Σ	note emphasis on temporal sequence and giving way (earlier vs later, old vs new, retrospective vs prospective, past- vs future-oriented, etc.)

Table 1 Distinguishing two 'ideal types' of religion. Note: based on Lincoln 2004, the distinction of 'ancient' vs 'post-ancient' may serve as a kind of summative synthesis of this table

contrasted ancient Egyptian 'cosmotheism' (which he classified as 'primary religion') with the Hebrew Bible's assumed exclusive monotheism, which thus became his model for 'secondary religion'.[11] According to Assmann, the essence of 'biblical religion' is a covenant binding together in uncompromising mutual loyalty and love a chosen people (Israel) and one god (Yahweh), compared to whom all other deities fade to the status of idols, non-gods or 'nothings'.[12]

Based on this opposition of two rather unequal comparanda (Egyptian religion as construed from ancient inscriptions vs a theological construct extracted from the Hebrew Bible), Assmann's paradigm has met with some criticism;[13] but the concept of a 'Mosaic distinction', which encapsulates the theory as a whole, has successfully made its way into studies on the ancient world at large. Assmann's use of 'primary' vs 'secondary' religion has encountered occasional scepticism; but the distinction has been adopted by Hebrew Bible scholars to characterise a fundamental divide *within* the materials they deal with.[14] 'Primary religion' here designates *ancient Israelite* religion, whereas 'secondary religion' refers to *early Judaism*, more specifically the religion of those who, according to biblical historiography, detached Judaism from its Canaanite past and the 'false gods' of its neighbours during the late Persian and Hellenistic periods.

The Babylonian exile is generally considered the major watershed between 'pre-exilic' Israelite religion ('primary') and 'post-exilic' early Judaism ('secondary') – note the pre/post qualification of a historical turning point. This notion of a hinge, or axis, separating the former from the latter and explaining historical (r)evolution from one to the other is another important element in the theory's conceptual makeup. It is indirectly related to axial age theory, another famous Heidelberg paradigm.[15] Depending on the particular historical data and contexts, the hinge may be conceptualised using other cognitive metaphors (crisis, revolution, turn … or conversion).

'Locative' vs 'utopian' religion?

The distinction between 'locative' and 'utopian' religion (no. 2 in **Table 1**) has a different academic origin, namely the University of Chicago. It was influentially developed by J.Z. Smith in studies exploring the emergence of Christianity in its Greco-Roman contexts and the

comparison of early Christianities with other late antique religions.[16] Smith built the assumed contrast of two types of religion on a spatial distinction applied to geographical as well as mental space: as outlined above, 'locative' religion is rooted in a given place, and it is meant to provide a stable social regime to that place here and now; in contrast, 'utopian' religion, a product of multiple diasporas, stands in tension with any actual, immanent regime. Its ideal alternative is some kind of counter-world, a new cosmos or a transcendent reality existing somewhere (beyond) but yet to come (if ever) into this world. Being detached from one particular locale and having its ultimate goal out there in the counter-world, 'utopian' religion can as a rule (except in cases of persecution) be practised anywhere by those who believe in its cosmology, its end and the ways of salvation leading from the deficient here to the hoped-for there.

As Smith and others have argued, the primary location of 'utopian' religion is the believer's inner self[17] and the ritually mediated experience of salvation in a community of believers (as opposed to society as a whole). But 'utopian' religion can be potentially ubiquitous, out of which early Christians, Manichaeans and others would craft an argument for claiming superior truth. The obvious structural problem is how widely diffused cells of a given 'utopian' religion can be coordinated among each other. The answer to diffusion must be communication and, more specifically, the reliance on a restricted set of normative scriptures (or images for that matter) as media of homogenisation. T2 religions tend to define core beliefs and transmit their knowledge through scripture; they are generally conceived as scripturalised 'book religions',[18] to which, in a material and visual culture perspective, we should add the binding power of key icons.

Since T2 religions are meant to be optional and do not generally embrace society as a whole, however, a concomitant problem will be the emergence and coexistence, within a given social space, of rival teachings, whether different T2 religions or variants of one alongside each other. If one particular group takes control of civic order, this will sooner or later lead to the discrimination and/or exclusion of dissenters. Built on the promise of a truth that can only partially be verified through experience here and now, and whose ultimate reality is transcendent and will fully deploy only in another, or the next world, T2 religions inevitably developed an entirely new regime of truth, most notably the management of truth through belief (or a particular version of it: faith), rhetoric, discipline and/or coercion.[19]

Genealogy: 'ancient' vs 'post-ancient' religion?

The question is whether our binary typology should be used exclusively for heuristic purposes, with T1 and T2 serving as 'ideal types' in a purely theoretical sense, or whether particular religions (or 'states of religion' within particular societies) – that is, real-world entities – should be construed as either T1 or T2 religion\s. Can T1 or T2 be identified in real-world history? As noted above, different scholars have referred to different items of **Table 1** with regard to their respective field, interests and research questions. It seems natural to assume that, whenever applied to other fields, any given distinction will tend to fit imperfectly if at all. Another question is whether the two types should be considered to be mutually exclusive when it comes to real history, and whether T2 should be assumed to have historically supplanted T1 at a given period in time. The latter seems to be taken for granted when Bruce Lincoln, a leading historian of ancient religion, opposes what he terms 'ancient' to 'post-ancient' religion. Take the following quote from the summary of his epilogue to an authoritative collective guidebook entitled *Religions of the Ancient World*:

> As ancient religion gave way to post-ancient, one could observe a *discourse* based on canonic corpora of sacred texts displacing inspired performances of sacred verse; *practices* of prayer, contemplation, and self-perfection displacing material mediations through sacrifice and statues of the deity; deterritorialized elective *communities* constructed on the basis of religious adherence displacing multistranded groups, within which ties of geography, politics, kinship, culture, and religion were isomorphic and mutually reinforcing; and *institutions* that, with some exceptions, had better (also more creative and varied) funding, a wider range of activities, and more autonomy from the state, displacing their weaker, more localised predecessors.[20]

This statement seems to indicate that the typology presented in **Table 1**, despite its many problematic aspects, operates in the mind of even a most critical, and knowledgeable, scholar not just in terms of a heuristic, but as a template for the long-term history of religion\s and its transition from classical to late antiquity, that is, a historical (r)evolution. Lincoln puts considerable emphasis on the claim that significant features of 'ancient religion' (our T1) were *displaced* in 'post-ancient' religion\s (T2). To be sure, he is fully cognisant that changes toward the 'post-ancient' came 'piecemeal'; antiquity broke down gradually and ended – if at all – 'only in fits and starts'.[21] But his summary condenses a dichotomic binary opposition of 'ancient' vs 'post-ancient' religion, and the former's 'giving way' to the latter. Although probably not intended (unless by way of tongue-in-cheek irony?), Lincoln's quote can easily be (mis-?)read as a scholarly version of religious supersessionism.[22]

Dichotomies, real-world history and material mediations

Readers will have understood by now that I am sceptical about the historical validity of this typology when applied to real-world history. The main difficulty I see is its dichotomic structure. Dichotomies tend to overstress differences in terms of contrast and to level out possible nuances, intermediate and transitory states between two end points of a spectrum.[23] When drawn up in a table (as done here), the two-column structure tends to mask tensions, degrees and nuances. No real-world historical formation will identify completely, and exclusively, with either type. More importantly perhaps, the two 'ideal types' and the whole spectrum between them can at times coexist within complex religious formations.

Two aspects of the dichotomy seem particularly unsatisfactory. First, primary/secondary or ante/post language tends to give way to an evolutionary (or revolutionary) subtext rarely made explicit, namely (r)evolution/development from T1 to T2, a discourse

masking the possibility (which history will often demonstrate as a fact) that processes and transitions may as well occur the other way, that is from T2 to T1 (a process which historians will be careful not to interpret in terms of 'regression'). The latter certainly occurred when Christianity rose from minority cult through tolerated movement to ultimately major imperial religion, in which process it incorporated a vast heritage of previous civic and imperial arrangements. 'Old religion' was thus transformed, not simply replaced – but so too was 'new religion'.[24] Second, scholarly and modern religious discourse tend to evaluate T2 religions as more critical, more mature, more individual and more sophisticated: in a nutshell, more fit for modernity than T1. This becomes plain when T1 and T2 formations are distinguished within one particular religious tradition (for example, Judaism vs Christianity, or 'Israelite religion' vs early Judaism); and, on macro-scale, whenever axial age theory and related cognitive metaphors are brought into the discussion. Theories of that kind abound in *religious* discourse legitimising dissociation of later from earlier stages of a religion. They come with a huge amount of normative assumptions and power implications, which historical scholarship should keep at a distance.

Historic religious formations will usually display mixed combinations of T1 and T2 features. It seems reasonable, for instance, to recognise some 'post-ancient' characteristics in late antique Judaism alongside others which, like ethnicity, would rather rank as 'ancient'. It is unclear in the case of the Judaic tradition whether the transition from 'ancient' to 'post-ancient' should be related to the exile (as most Hebrew Bible scholars contend), to the Maccabean crisis and Hasmonean rule in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE (as many historians of 'ancient' or 'early Judaism' would argue), to the loss of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE or to the late antique emergence of diverse forms of rabbinic Judaism in Palestine and Mesopotamia. While one might consider that Israelite and pre-exilic Judahite religion had definitely been a case of 'ancient' (or 'primary') religion, early Judaism clearly passed through various stages of transformation towards a state we might characterise as 'post-ancient'; but it never fully abandoned some T1 features such as ethnic definition. Although some openings for optional membership would be introduced in diaspora settings, Judaism never became optional in the same sense as Mithraism or early Christian or Manichaean religion.

One should further acknowledge a variety of simultaneously but locally separate forms and developments within many religious traditions since the Persian period and allow for a great spectrum of diverse local arrangements. All this makes it difficult to consider a given religious formation as 'post-ancient' *per se*, unless it emerged under definitely 'post-ancient' conditions and circumstances. But even the history of early Christianities or Manichaeism(s) needs to account for a great variety of different regional developments. 'Utopian' as they may have been in mind, particular communities developed in specific local contexts and had to arrange themselves with as many constraints as required by their given context.[25] Choosing to join a Christian community might well have implied, at the time of conversion, a disembedding move for an individual, but the disembedding need not have been complete in each case, and the community itself would remain connected to wider society or sooner or later re-embed itself into the local social fabric. If we follow the rise of Christianity from a great variety of only partially disembedded local communities, each with its own arrangements and entanglements, through pre-Byzantine attempts at coordination and negotiation of diversity to the establishment and consolidation of an imperial Church in the Mediterranean arena, there can be no doubt that this tradition was demonstrably and entirely *re-embedded* into an imperial social order, which in many ways resembled previous T1 religion as much as it contained obvious T2 features.[26]

I therefore suggest that we use our table of distinctions only as a heuristic, and that *for strictly heuristic purposes* we transform our dichotomy into a *triangular* arrangement. Let us consider any historically circumscribed religious formation in terms of its relations to both T1 and T2, taking each feature as a variable. Does a particular set of data point to T1 or to T2, to some intermediate position or to the simultaneous existence of T1 and T2 features? Are these clustered, distinguishable according to social level (such a elite vs popular, imperial vs local) or competing with each other? A given formation will rarely occupy the same relative position with regard to all the features listed in **Table 1**.

According to Lincoln, one of the characteristics of the transition from 'ancient' to 'post-ancient' religion is that '*material mediations of every sort diminished in their import.* They were displaced – although never completely – by practices that relocated the prime site of interest and action inside the human subject.'[27] This statement is crucial for the argument I shall develop in the following section. If Lincoln were right *stricto sensu*, there would be no point in arguing a material religion approach to late antique and any other 'post-ancient' religion. I suspect, however, that a major difference between 'ancient' and 'post-ancient' (or BCE and CE) religion is *not* the progressive vanishing of material mediation or religion-related material culture but, perhaps, the virtual explosion of religious literature and, no doubt, the latter's privileged consideration as an object of study in religio-historical research. *Pace* Lincoln, I submit that material mediation and material culture were no less important in 'post-ancient' religion\s than they had been in 'ancient' religion, but that scholars may have paid less attention to the material as religion\s became increasingly talkative and thus produced an ever-growing amount of textual data. Yet religion never got rid of material mediation completely (as actually conceded by Lincoln). Material mediation always remained and, ultimately, *is* an essential requirement for any social formation dealing with the non-obvious in discourse, practice, community and discipline. The question, then, is how to address material and visual data, and the practices of mediation related to them, as an essential aspect of the study of religion as such.[28]

Questioning premises and assumptions, methodology and theory

Gods, Goddesses and Images of God (henceforth *GGIG*) was co-written with my teacher and colleague Othmar Keel. More than a quarter of a century has passed since its original

publication in 1992, but the book continues to be cited, for better or for worse, as a standard reference for ancient 'Canaanite' and 'Israelite' religious iconography. We were concerned with a more strictly historical, contextualised analysis of material and visual data, especially so-called minor arts from 2nd- and 1st-millennium BCE Palestine: stamp seals, amulets, ivory carvings, metal or terracotta figurines, coinage (attested in Palestine since the late 5th century BCE) and more, retrieved in archaeological excavations. These materials are interesting data for the historian of religion on several grounds: they can be localised and dated individually, classified as groups and studied in terms of production (sometimes 'workshops'), distribution and consumption. Broadly speaking, they demonstrate how much the ancient southern Levant was an integral part of the ancient world, an important node of political, economic and ideational communication networks operating between regions as far apart as Egypt and Mesopotamia, their horizon also including the Arabian peninsula, Iran and Anatolia, the Aegean and the western Mediterranean. Regional small-scale polities operated a variety of more localised networks. It is this tension between the supra-regional and the local, and the degree to which larger conjunctions impacted local social formations while being adopted and adapted by them, that can be studied in detail on the basis of ancient material and visual culture. The latter offers an interesting background, and indeed primary source material, for the study of ancient religion, a background which differs from and usefully supplements the textual data generally studied by historians of religion and exegetes of ancient scriptures.

Methodologically speaking, *GGIG* operated on two basic premises. The first – that visual data can extend and supplement historical research in genuinely different and often surprising ways – has been emphatically welcomed by colleagues in the field, even those who would not integrate it in their own scholarly practice. The other remains contested: that historical research should prioritise datable archaeological evidence over biblical texts, which can rarely be dated and localised with sufficient precision to serve in a strictly historical argument.[29] That said, one should stress that, despite significant advances in absolute dating methods, archaeology generally performs better in dating artefacts by relative rather than absolute chronology. The study of material and visual culture is therefore most rewarding when we address Fernand Braudel's middle ground of history and time: that is social and political conjunctures as distinguished from *histoire événementielle* on the one hand, *histoire de la longue durée* on the other. I shall now try to look back at *GGIG* from the point of view of methodology and theory, with a hindsight of 25 years and a change of disciplinary perspective.[30]

Material basis, data selection, interpretations

To investigate non-textual (and especially non-literary) artefacts makes the student enter what we might term a different dimension of history: instead of language and ideas, one deals with material artefacts in the first place, their physical characteristics, potential and limitations. 'Material' means studying physical transformation and manipulation and implies a concern for whole 'object-biographies' and their affordances. Questions are raised about the origin of raw material, place(s) of transformation, techniques, skills and tools employed, choices with regard to the object type, its decoration, subsequent circulation, consumption, disposal and so on. The primary interest of *GGIG* was admittedly with iconography. But artefacts should not be simply treated as media – that is, as carriers of messages (let alone messages for us); they were first of all commodities produced and used for particular, socially constructed and negotiated purposes and functions. Almost inevitably then, dealing with artefacts makes one imagine people operating in society (this in stark contrast to those approaches to texts that construe an *implied* author or reader, consciously detaching them from *actual* historical authors and potential readers). The ultimate concern of a historian working with artefacts will be society, even when focusing on religion.

On these grounds, some of the most obvious shortcomings of *GGIG* can be easily identified: the material basis from which we developed our argument was determined by previous work on the *Corpus of Stamp-Seal Amulets from Palestine/Israel*, a long-term project of painstaking documentation initiated by Othmar Keel in the early 1980s.[31] Stamp seals took the lead in our discussion, not only because they represented the class of potentially relevant artefacts that had been the most neglected by previous and contemporary scholarship but also because they were the most easily available data for our study. We did bring in other artefact classes, but in a rather unsystematic way, whenever this seemed appropriate or whenever then-current debates prompted us to do so. Exhaustive documentation was not our aim (which became a problem when later readers limited their involvement to the digest instead of themselves diving into the mass of primary data available). That said, I do not think (and, to my knowledge, reviewers did not point out) that we missed crucial evidence then available.[32]

More importantly, I have come to doubt some of the book's bolder hypotheses: for instance, our theory about a sliding withdrawal of the Israelite goddess (or goddesses) from anthropomorphic imagery to purely symbolical, tree-like representation. Keel and I have also come to rather different views about whether or not Yahweh (the major deity in Israelite and Judahite religion) would have been represented anthropomorphically in his Jerusalem temple.[33] My own research has led me to doubt whether ancient Israelite and Judahite religion significantly differed from that of their neighbours, and whether the usual ethno-national labels are useful classifiers in this regard.[34] While I remain strongly interested, with many others, in understanding religious diversity in the ancient southern Levant, and prepared to re-evaluate any evidence pointing toward peculiar Yahwist formations within a general model of regional diversity, I do not think, for theoretical reasons, that historical reconstruction should operate from premises assuming a fundamental distinctiveness or exceptionality of 'ancient Israel's' religion – of any religion, as it were. Such premises are based on religious discourse itself. That some Judahite scribes among the biblical writers considered their

religion as genuinely distinctive and their god as genuinely different from any other (non-gods or 'nothings', in the view of the hardliners) is a matter to be historically explained, an *explanandum*, by no means an *explanans*.

The move to the wider comparative study of religion has further contributed to create something of an epistemic distance between *GGIG* and my more recent work. Unlike most conventional biblical exegesis (and 'biblical archaeology', for that matter), the academic study of religion\s is a heavily theory-driven, almost obsessively self-reflective discipline, which considers scholarship itself to be a genuinely constructive endeavour (rather than simply a reconstructive one). In such an epistemological framework the critical (at times, deconstructive) engagement with the history and historiography of scholarly research has become the rule rather than the exception in my research. I have become more aware than previously how much the arena in which we produce and publicise our research affects the way we approach, select and analyse our data and turn them into 'sources'. Proper historical methodology requires a methodological bifocalism or double historicisation of sorts, implying a critical awareness and assessment of the concepts and assumptions, institutional settings and disciplinary conventions that frame and impact one's own historical inquiry alongside the more conventional concentration on data or sources from the past.

Unresolved dilemmata: what data should count (or count first) in the history of religion\s?

Studies on the history of ancient Israelite and Judahite religion – more than on the religion of ancient Ammonites, Arabs, Arameans, Edomites, Moabites, Philistines and Phoenicians ('peoples' whose practices and beliefs are often conceptualised as distinct 'religions') – have always had to struggle with the question whether and how to correlate archaeological and epigraphical data with canonical biblical literature.[35] The latter has, over the centuries, acquired such a prestigious status as *sacra historia* and charter myth of modernity (and, lately, of the Jewish state as well) that even hardboiled secular historians will not easily dismiss (nor even bracket temporarily for heuristic purposes) biblical texts when addressing the 1st-millennium BCE political, cultural and religious history of the southern Levant.[36]

Although the days of fierce antagonism between so-called 'minimalist' and 'maximalist' positions regarding the use of the Bible in historical scholarship seem to be counted, books weaving together biblical with non-biblical, literary-traditional with archaeological (that is, recently recovered and contingent, but generally datable and strictly contextualised) data into a kind of harmonious synthesis continue to be published at a regular pace and find relatively large audiences. Nadav Na'aman, an eminent critical historian of ancient Israel, has raised strong protest against some of his colleagues' attempts to rewrite the history of ancient Israel and Judah first and foremost on the basis of archaeological data.[37] Archaeology, he argues, has an important contribution to make but does not deserve a status of high court judging in biblical and historical research (note 'and', which rightly distinguishes 'biblical' from 'historical'). On the other hand, some of the most prominent 'archaeology first' historians seem to have turned into biblical scholars themselves, offering revisionist views and historicising re-dated biblical texts with little consideration for the subtleties of literary analysis.[38] Another group of top-level scholars, who have met over twenty years under the umbrella of the so-called 'European Seminar in Historical Methodology', has recently brought its work to an end.[39] This engaged and sophisticated scholarship has been almost exclusively produced by biblical scholars; it comes as no surprise that the historical reliability or proper historical situation of selected biblical texts should have been the main focus of the group's discussions.

Looking at the three interested subfields (the history of ancient Israel and Judah, the study of biblical historiography, and the archaeology of ancient Israel and Judah from the Iron Ages to the Hellenistic period) from a certain distance (and with great sympathy for all participants), it strikes me that the political, cultural and religious history of the 1st millennium BCE southern Levant remains spellbound by the monumental presence of the Bible in even the most critical scholars' minds. One may also point out that recent reconceptualisation of the Bible as 'cultural memory' has added a further nuance to its status as a prime referent for historical, and especially religio-historical, research.

Proper historical methodology requires that we distinguish between contextualised and datable evidence ('primary data') on the one hand, and heavily edited tradition-literature ('secondary, tertiary … sources') on the other, in terms of both status and analytical procedure.[40] The concept of cultural memory embedded in traditional, ultimately canonical literature – a concept widely discussed in recent cultural theory and usefully applied to biblical literature[41] – in my view strengthens rather than diminishes the need for a rigorous procedural separation. There may of course be instances (perhaps a few, or many) where the (biblical) literary tradition preserves some sort of historically reliable memory of much earlier events, agents, discourses, practices or value settings. Such instances, however, cannot be simply assumed as the generally valid default option; they need to be demonstrated by proper critical argument.

To stick to a procedure based on the procedural(!) analytical priority of 'primary data' (that is, data from the actual chronotopical context that is the focus of an inquiry) is not an easy task, however, since it requires that scholars manage to at least provisionally (heuristically) bracket what they know (or think they know) biblical literature reports about the ancient southern Levant, and especially about Israelite and Judahite societies and religion. Freeing one's mind from the mould of assumptions derived from the Bible, Bible-related religious education and/or diffuse cultural memory requires us to address 'Israelite religion' in the same terms as any other variant of southern Levantine religion (thus making it comparable on equal terms in the first place), and to fully expose religio-historical research to anthropological, culture-historical and sociological theory.

Coming back to *GGIG*, probably no scholar would contest that to take into account the archaeological (and, in our focus, the visual, iconographic) record of ancient Levantine societies is an important, even indispensable aspect of

critical religio-historical research. It seems obvious that material and visual data contain key information about ancient practices and the ancient imaginary that have no direct equivalent in the literary record, whether biblical or extra-biblical. It is the procedural prioritisation, over against the biblical record, of these materials that many scholars working in the highly specialised research environment of biblical studies and 'ancient Israelite religion' find more difficult to accept. One reason is that it requires a very different training from theirs. That said, similar open-mindedness is also required on behalf of scholars with a special training in the study of ancient images: we too will have to learn to look at our data in new and more sophisticated ways. Our studies have long focused on iconography and iconology: that is, the interpretation of images according to their semantic quality and 'meaning'. Text interpreters by training, we may have remained a bit too close to Erwin Panofsky's meaning-oriented methodology for the history of art.[42] We may have to better grasp in future research that images should not be studied in isolation from the objects on which they appear. And, in the same way as the study of ancient texts has recently expanded to consider questions regarding the very materiality of ancient inscriptions and literary texts, the future study of ancient images will have to pay more attention to the materiality of those ancient artefacts preserving religion-related iconography in the first place, and to the new analytical perspectives of new materiality studies.[43]

If approached in a reasonably sophisticated way, material and visual culture will continue to open alternative ways to the study of past religion, whether in terms of preferred deities, cosmological assumptions, ritual practices and contact and exchange with neighbours or hegemons, or in terms of more generally religious concerns shared in a particular location, group, community or region. One particular strength of contextualised ancient artefactual data is that they force and enable scholars to ask questions about geographical, economic and social location, production, distribution and consumption of the relevant artefacts. They allow us to construe (and make us aware that *we* construe) ancient 'religion' not exclusively in terms of ideas, but above all in terms of social communication, including matters of political power and economic exchange. Ancient artefacts, their production, diffusion and consumption can be studied in connection with political, social, economic, cultural and ideological conjunctures. Their seismographic sensitivity may be finer-tuned, historically speaking, than many a literary religious text, especially if the latter has attained canonical, mnemohistorical or otherwise normative status which should make it fit for trans- or metahistorical concerns. A major strength of using artefactual data for the study of ancient religion is of course their relation, in principle, to archaeologically established contexts. Context is crucial, not only for dating purposes, but also to understand how objects were appropriated and how they functioned in the lives of those who used them. Again, we transcend the world of ideas by grounding it in other facets of life, including everyday concerns, special ritual performances and bodily practices.

Artefacts and contexts may be classified and grouped according to criteria which may differ from established, a priori religion-related historical taxonomies. Studies in religion often tend to categorise their material according to religious 'traditions' and/or conformity to standard expectations about them. Categories are frequently either ill-defined or otherwise unhelpful, restrictive and potentially misleading. In the study of religion in the southern Levant BCE, container categories are easily ethnicised in terms of 'Israelite', 'Judahite', 'Moabite' or 'Philistine' religion.[44] Yet the model of such classification alongside ethnic or ethno-political categories is not inscribed in the data; it is directly derived from the Bible.[45] Previous generations of scholars tended to classify putatively 'non-conformist' features of religious practice (that is, features not fitting normative expectations based on an often limited knowledge of biblical literature and its own normative stance) as 'Canaanite', 'syncretistic', 'popular' or otherwise 'folk'.[46] (In studies on religion in late antiquity, comparable labels would read 'Christian', 'Judeo-Christian', 'pagan', or 'Gnostic', 'orthodox' vs 'heterodox', etc.). When considering whether or not to adopt such classifications, one must ask and critically evaluate to what extent they are required by data and help to better explain those data, or whether they are prompted by assumptions that are extraneous to the data and do not necessarily improve our critical understanding of ancient religious history.

Theoretical challenge I: diversity, spheres and levels in ancient religion

In spite of all the criticism expressed above, the study of ancient southern Levantine religion has significantly progressed over the last two or three decades. In addition to new material, visual and epigraphic finds, major advances concern terminological differentiation and theoretical sophistication. One significant issue in the discussion has been the move away from earlier approaches which addressed southern Levantine religions (plural) as relatively homogeneous units distinguished according to ethno-polities, towards an increasing recognition of religion (singular) as a broad social field characterised by internal tensions and diversity.[47] How that diversity should best be accounted for terminologically, theoretically and methodologically is an important question.

One striking feature, which appeared at the turn of the 21st century, has been the use of the plural 'religions' with reference to what had previously been conceptualised as one ethno-national religion, namely 'Israelite religion'. To mention two major examples: first, the magisterial synthesis of 'parallactic approaches' to the history of religion in ancient Israel and Judah published by Ziony Zevit, which is based on archaeological as much as on selected biblical data, entitled *The Religions of Ancient Israel*.[48] The plural here serves to signal diversity and make sense of many different sets of archaeological data which cannot easily be reduced to a homogeneous overall pattern or framework. According to Zevit, 'Israelite religions are the varied, symbolic expressions of, and appropriate responses to the deities and powers that groups of communities deliberately affirmed as being of unrestricted value to them within their worldview.'[49] Diversity here is founded on a plurality of local (and localised)

communities. A far more conservative approach was followed a few years later by the biblical scholar Richard Hess in a survey entitled *Israelite Religions*.[50] In his book, the plural serves to distinguish various areas of concern, such as historiography, law or cult and ritual, as well as to differentiate chronologically successive phases (pre-Israelite, early Israelite, monarchic, exilic, post-exilic) in the historical evolution of 'ancient Israelite' religion. Diversity remains heavily framed by assumptions of essential unity and continuity.

The strategic use of the plural 'religions' clearly serves two very different purposes in the two books: whereas Zevit's aim is to stress diversity and plurality among largely coeval religious practitioners within a geographical area broadly defined as 'ancient Israel' (note the consistent use of plurals in the quoted phrase), Hess's is an attempt to describe relatively homogeneous, if diachronically sequenced systemic states of equilibrium of a cultural unit 'Israel' going through a number of subsequent transformations but retaining its core identity as 'Israel'. The latter approach stands in continuity with the conventional paradigm of differentiating 1st-millennium southern Levantine societies, cultures and religions according to ethno-political classifiers, whereas the former introduces diversity, variety, plurality and dynamic processes of renegotiation among distinct communities within the one ethno-political unit called 'ancient Israel'.[51]

Needless to say, my own work tends to favour Zevit's innovative approach rather than Hess's conservative one, although I am not sure whether Zevit's use of the plural 'religions' is always helpful in the discussion. After all, it might be understood as referring to the many different datasets he discusses, as if each of them represented a discrete, and to some extent stand-alone, 'religion'. Such a view risks producing new misunderstandings if the field of ancient southern Levantine religious practices is further atomised. Let us recall the distinction discussed above in section 2 between T1 and T2 religion: it makes far more sense, in my view, to attribute the plural 'religions' to T2 situations, where several offers compete with each other for members and recognition within a given society, than to a T1 framework where a religious field as such is identified within the larger fabric of social and cultural communication. 'Religion at Athens' or 'religion in Rome', 'religion in Jerusalem' or 'religion in Samaria', Bethel, Arad or Elephantine may well be described, on the basis of available documentation, as materially different and thus distinct; but should we consider each as a coherent, homogeneous, monolithic religious system? To describe a particular situation and context does not mean that we need elevate it to the status of a discrete taxonomic unit in a theoretical approach aiming at generalisation.

Another, perhaps more significant differentiation based on social stratification has become standard in recent research on ancient southern Levantine religion. What started as the recognition of a discrete level of so-called 'popular', 'non-conformist' or 'private' religion as against 'official', state-run religion four decades ago has been transformed more recently into a much more fine-tuned model distinguishing several kinds of diversity, namely conceptual, 'socio-religious' (royal, urban, rural, household and personal) and geographical.[52] It is indeed plausible to distinguish different levels of religious concern, practice and belief according to the size of stakeholder communities, the implied social relevance and reach of their religious concerns and the degree of demarcation of spaces conspicuously or exclusively designed for religious ritual. Working along these lines, Rüdiger Schmitt has recently suggested a model of no fewer than eight distinct types and sub-types of cult places:[53]

- IA Domestic (house) cult
- IB Domestic shrines
- II Work-related cults
- III Neighbourhood shrines
- IV Burial grounds and ancestor cult installations
- V Local and village shrines (A intra-mural, B (extra-mural) high places, C gate sanctuaries)
- VI Palace shrines
- VII Regional sanctuaries (A open-air, B temples)
- VIII Supraregional and state sanctuaries

I appreciate Schmitt's attempt at typological differentiation and sophistication but tend to consider his list more as a heuristic rather than a descriptive real-world or normative analytical tool.[54] The typology is not totally consistent, since its defining criteria oscillate between practices (cults), material arrangements (installations, shrines, sanctuaries) and spatial locations; it will often be difficult to precisely identify an archaeologically given situation with one and only one of these types; and the apparent implication that family and household concerns would only be expressed and ritually processed in domestic contexts can easily be proven wrong on both archaeological and textual grounds. Real-life settings will display the combined features of several different types. Still, Schmitt's list can help us to think about such issues as whose agency and which community we should hypothesise behind a given material assemblage, what kind of religious concern (or claim) could have motivated it, and what outreach or significance claim would have been attached to it by those who were responsible for running a particular religious place.

Combining such attempts at conceptualising diversity within ancient religion, and coming back to the material artefacts and visual symbolism on which Keel and I built the religio-historical argument exposed in *GGIG*, I draw the following intermediate conclusion: a material and visual culture approach to ancient religion will always need to combine and hold in balance two aspects of the ancient data we work with – individual objects on the one hand, that is, artefacts which need to be analysed with utmost attention and which by comparison may then be understood as 'nodes' in a web of ancient material, economic, political and cultural relations, in which religion had a role to play; and, on the other hand, the contexts and assemblages in which objects are actually found, and which preserve information about why and to what end a particular artefact was actually used specifically there and then.[55]

Theoretical challenge II: religion before religion, 'embedded religion', non-religion

A last and crucial question to be addressed here is on what grounds we should count particular items or sets of material

and visual artefacts as pertaining to ancient 'religion' in the first place. To illustrate this point with an example related to *GGIG*: in the chapter devoted to Iron Age II B (9th–8th centuries BCE), Keel and I drew attention to what we observed to be a significant characteristic of the period's iconography, namely its strong Egyptianising features, among which were the conspicuous presence of winged hybrid animals and humans and the fact that these were quite often represented with a solar disc on their head.[56] We hypothesised that, since much of this iconography would have been processed in Levantine workshops, it would probably have lost its specifically Egyptian religious or mythological connotations; but the reference to Egypt and solar symbolism as the ultimate origin and reference of these motifs seemed consistent and strong enough to postulate some influence on (or 'solarisation' of) the religious symbol system of the time. The material and visual basis for that claim was provided by dozens of stamp seals but also other image-bearing artefacts from various places. Among other groups of artefacts, we discussed what scholars commonly refer to as the 'Samaria ivories'. Some colleagues have criticised our use, within a religio-historical argument, of materials which in antiquity had been produced to decorate furniture and boxes for jewellery, perfume and other luxury items unrelated to cult or religious ritual. Could it be that, writing in a religio-historical perspective, we might have imposed the category of religion on objects which had no direct relation to religion at all?[57]

At the time, we might have responded to this criticism that elite members of the 1st-millennium societies of the ancient Levant would probably not have distinguished religious from non-religious symbolism as clear-cut and straightforwardly as modern western archaeologists working in thoroughly secularised academic environments. We would have insisted that, even when appearing on luxury toilette items, winged hybrids carrying solar discs represented sufficiently non-obvious entities to count as 'religious' imaginary. And we might have added that religion at the time would obviously not have been conceived as a discrete and self-contained system of communication in the way it has been theorised by sociologists for modern societies; religion would have somehow pervaded all (or at least many different) domains of human life and activity, affecting in its own way such mundane domains as handicrafts and everyday elite aesthetics. We could also have referred to the well-known idea that beyond ritual acts serving to explicitly address deities or *daimones*, significant parts of ancient religion were 'embedded' in all kinds of everyday practices and concerns.

That said, the very concept of 'embedded (ancient) religion' has been thoroughly criticised by the religious studies scholar Brent Nongbri, who argues that we should avoid the (in his view, modern) concept of religion altogether when referring to pre-modern, and certainly ancient, societies. According to Nongbri, there simply was no religion 'before religion' in antiquity.[58] To be sure, people dealt with non-obvious beings in everyday life and on special occasions such as festivals, sacrifices and processions. But these were part of a framework of social communication and meaning-making that did not require a discrete concern that 'we' (namely, modern westerners) would set apart as specifically 'religious'. If this may sound like quibbling about words and appropriate definitions to some, such is after all an essential part of critical scholarship. I agree with Nongbri that historians (of religion and otherwise) need to be careful not to impose anachronistic notions and certainly not their own world-view on the data and societies they study.[59] It may well be that, having produced our *GGIG* in a biblical studies (and, after all, theological) environment, the discourse rules and expectations of that environment may at times have affected our historical argument, fuelling religion into ancient objects and practices where non-religious explanations would have been equally valid and perhaps at times preferable. That said, *pace* Nongbri, I still find it difficult to understand why historians of ancient societies should refrain from using a category like 'religion' on such simple grounds that this category took on a significantly new – and henceforth normative and highly influential – meaning from the 16th century onwards.

How different is BCE from CE? Ancient and late ancient religion in a material and visual culture perspective

To conclude, let me reiterate the title question of this chapter and try to extrapolate from our research on 2nd- and 1st-millennium BCE southern Levantine religion (and non-religion) to the main topic of this volume. My far too limited knowledge of late antique religion\s does not allow me to address and construe the comparison of BCE and CE religion materially. But I may be allowed to ask whether a somewhat similar approach, based on material and visual culture, with special attention to so-called minor arts, could not equally well be taken in the study of 1st-millennium CE religious history. We should ask what differences might or might not be expected – and whether the study of material and visual culture would support or rather question the clear-cut distinction between 'ancient' and 'post-ancient', or T1 and T2 religion\s. In this last section of an already longish chapter, I shall proceed by way of suggestion rather than demonstration, from 'rather different' through 'somehow different' to 'not so different, after all'; and I shall conclude by asking *who*, after all, construes and evaluates the degree of difference between BCE and CE religion, and on what grounds.

As the discussion above has shown, historians of religion have suggested a great number of criteria to distinguish 'T2' from 'T1', or CE religions from BCE religion. Many of the criteria and concepts lying behind them concern core features of religion such as the presence or absence of canonical scriptures, notions of absolute truth, strong transcendence/immanence distinctions, belief in post-mortal salvation, imperial institutionalisation vs sectarianism, the practice or rejection of animal sacrifice and so forth. From a macro-historical perspective, there can be no doubt that, as networks of transregional trade and communication extended over the centuries, religious traditions differentiated and adapted their organisational networks, their agents (prophets, healers, traders, monks and other religious entrepreneurs) crossing ever-increasing distances and engaging in competition with each other within and between ever larger imperial frameworks. As a result, the religious field as a whole was deeply transformed

and reconfigured. This core insight from a macro-historical perspective cannot reasonably be doubted.[60]

Yet to acknowledge such historical processes of socio-cultural and religious transformation (an important facet of early globalisation, as it were), processes that would have followed different paths depending on local contexts, power structures and resources, should not lead us to buy in to overly gross and dichotomous distinctions between 'ancient religion' and 'post-ancient religions'. In the framework of this volume, crucial questions are whether and how the material and communicative infrastructure would have significantly changed and adapted to entirely new religious concerns, and whether the transformation would have affected the material and visual culture of specific communities of producers and consumers. Previous research on 'new religions' in the Roman empire may have exaggerated aspects of discontinuity and innovation ('New Testament studies' provide the prime example, but they are not alone).[61] Taking into account the fact that the religious discourse of many ancient or late antique 'new' religions presented itself as innovative and discontinuous, could historians of religion perhaps have followed the rhetoric of their source material when construing late antique, 'post-ancient' religions as essentially different from earlier, 'ancient' religion? Could it be that there is more continuity between 'ancient' and putatively 'post-ancient' religion than we usually think?

The reality of historical processes and transformations which affected religion from BCE to CE cannot be denied. That said, we should demonstrate that reality from data rather than from religious elite discourse authored by stakeholders, experts and virtuosi. When studying matters of diversity vs hegemony, the reality of both needs to be checked against the evidence of contextualised material and visual culture. Both diversity and hegemony, the traditional and the new, may well appear entangled in different sets of material data. One interesting question to ask, when studying localised material and visual data, would be how wide the cultural horizon of any given local community would reach, and whether it would be more affected by local concerns, cooperations and rivalries than by regional or transregional sectarian ones. Taking into account how late antique imperial formations were organised in rather different 'styles' east and west, allowing different religious groups and sects more or less latitude in practising their difference or distinctiveness, we may ask whether and how this difference in diversity is reflected in the material, visual and epigraphic record. The religious policy of the late Roman/Byzantine empire is generally viewed as more hegemonous than that of the Parthian or Sasanian empires. It should be possible to test through the study of material, visual and epigraphic data to what extent that general characterisation (which I take from the secondary literature) is an appropriate representation of historical reality. I assume, however, that, if the different styles can be substantiated through the study of material data, they will hardly coincide with the T1/T2 distinction discussed on pages 156–7.

To point out that the new (or 'secondary') religious formations did not always nor completely replace all facets of earlier ('primary') traditions and practices is to state a truism. Moreover, not all CE religions adopted (one might say, converted to) 'T2' features in the same way. Even if they appealed to non-obvious entities that were increasingly conceived as otherworldly and transcendent (one aspect important to axial age theory), much of CE religious practice remained essentially 'locative': that is, centring on the local social fabric and the immediate everyday concerns for the prosperity of a local urban society or a village community, and the good life of its members.[62]

Historians of religion have always been aware of such aspects of continuity of local traditions within 'new' religions (think of the transformation of the goddess Isis into the Christian Mother of God, to mention but the most visual and iconic example). But there has also been a strong tendency to relegate matters of continuity, or 'persistent paganism', to low-level popular, non-official religion, if not 'magic' *tout court*. I need not go into an elaborate argument to state that, from a material and visual culture perspective on ancient and late antique religion, and despite persistent attempts to taxonomically treat ancient magic as a discrete field,[63] the latter is an integral part of the overall religious field at any given time in any given location. What should interest us as historians of religion is how practices classified by some as 'magic', and the material and visual data that are attributed to it, relate to and complement other aspects of local religion in any given society and community.

A material and visual approach to ancient and late antique religion will probably relativise both the BCE/CE distinction (which, being modelled on BC/AD, is a crypto-confessional convention) and the dichotomy of 'ancient religion' and 'post-ancient religion\s'. Whether these distinctions will continue to mark and structure the history of religion\s will not so much depend on the data, but on scholars who study them and the discursive communities in which they discuss their research. As long as not only BCE and CE scholars, but also archaeologists, philologists or iconographers, experts in theology and specialists of 'ancient magic' operate in largely self-contained and putatively self-sufficient (sub-)disciplinary environments, I see little chance for a thorough reconfiguration of the field and its basic assumptions. If we wish the BCE/CE distinction to fall and a material-cum-visual-culture approach to gain prominence in the study of ancient religion, we need to develop a much more inter- and trans-disciplinary conversation and parallel research environments. The ultimate aim of a material-cum-visual-religion approach should thus not be to develop yet another province of exclusive special expertise; rather, it should invite scholars from as many different disciplines as necessary, studying as many different aspects of ancient culture and society as possible, to engage in mutually challenging cooperation rather than disciplinary boundary-working. Our conversation will be facilitated if we focus on clearly defined questions, combine macro- and micro-perspectives, and appeal to critical theory at large to base the discussion on appropriate etic, non-religious terminology.

The *Empires of Faith* project that initiated this volume has been an excellent instantiation of just such a trans-disciplinary conversation. Perspectives might seem even

brighter if historians of religion engaging in material and visual culture studies are ready to extend their theoretical concerns beyond their own, somewhat traditional questions of representation and meaning, to move towards such much broader horizons as propounded by actor-network-theory (Latour 2005), cognition and material engagement theory (Malafouris 2013) and other theoretical work on practice and materiality. Much remains to be improved in future critical research, which promises to be even more trans-disciplinary, collaborative and mind-opening than our past endeavours.

Notes

1 Readers will note occasional switches between (or combinations of) singular and plural in my use of the term 'religion'. The backslash in 'religion\s' is intended to emphasise that using one or the other really makes a difference in the way we consider the concept. When using the singular, I address a social field identified by a particular concern for non-obvious agents and structured ways to act by involving them in the lives of individuals, groups and societies; the singular should not mask the highly diverse and often segmented, at times fragmented, character of the field. In contrast, the plural is meant to stress diversity and at times optional varieties within the field; if the singular embraces a social field, the plural points to particular social formations, including institutions and organisations. Historians need to resist both homogenisation (as suggested by a singular) and reification of this or that 'tradition' (as often implied by the plural or reference to one particular 'religion'). That said, the difference between singular and plural may be crucial for our understanding of differences (if not *the* difference) between BCE (religion) and CE (religions) – if difference there is.

2 On the millennium as a meaningful period, with Muḥammad as a major caesura, see Fowden 2014; for a critical reflection on periodisation, see Le Goff 2014.

3 Keel and Uehlinger 1992 and 1998.

4 I shall take a very broad view on the concept of 'late antiquity' here, considering one of the characteristics of the period to be the rise of social formations ('religions') which explicitly put their origins and development in relation to earlier antiquity, whether as a model to be followed or as a framework to be superseded. When precisely the period fringes out into what is commonly designated as Middle Ages is irrelevant to my present argument. Emphasis is on the scholarly concept as much as on datable social facts, as with 'BCE' and 'CE'. 'Late antiquity' can in such a perspective be understood as a particular *Denkraum* (or 'intellectual space': see Schmidt, Schmid and Neuwirth 2016) as much as a distinct period in time.

5 That the concept of 'paganism' is unhelpful as a critical category in several respects has long been demonstrated (Remus 2004; Jürgasch 2016; Stenger 2018). It is baffling to observe how difficult it seems to be for scholars studying ancient religion to put it to rest once and for all – proof, if needed, that Christian premises and terminology continue to hinder the development of critical third-order vocabulary.

6 Morphological variations among various modern European languages (e.g. Christianity, *christianisme*, *Christentum*) result from particular semantic differentiations, but the concepts share common assumptions.

7 A good alternative candidate for a historical precedent would be early Zoroastrian religion: ethnically defined and transmitted, 'Zoroastrianism' resists easy classification in similar ways to 'Judaism'.

8 Assmann 1996 and 2009. The contrast of traditional T1 religion and Christianity as the model of a T2 religion appears rather nicely in Part I of Spaeth 2013, where no fewer than eight chapter titles refer to geographical regions (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria-Canaan, Israel, Anatolia, Iran, Greece, Rome), followed by 'Early Christianity' as the single non-locative entity. Johnston 2004 has a similar organisation in its section on 'Histories'.

9 I am aware that critical scholarship does not always rely on this typology, and that specialised studies on local histories of religion need not refer to it. Moreover, as one reviewer has rightly remarked, there are richer conceptual frameworks than the one discussed here in both history and sociology of religion (e.g. Bellah 1964 on 'religious evolution', where five stages in 'religious evolution' labelled 'primitive', 'archaic', 'historical', 'early modern' and 'modern' are distinguished). Yet such more sophisticated typologies seem to have been relatively uneffective in overcoming the BCE/CE divide and putting to rest comparable dichotomic models (see below on 'axial age' theories).

10 Sundermeier's observations were first published in 1980 and the distinction repeated, occasionally with slight modifications, in a number of his later publications. Note that, according to Sundermeier, 'primary religious experience' continued to guide African believers long after their conversion to Christianity or Islam, never completely to be replaced by 'secondary religious experience'. See Diesel 2006: 25–31 for a convenient summary.

11 That 'monotheism' correctly qualifies the Hebrew Bible's religious stance is questioned by many; for recent discussions, see Lynch 2014 and Römer 2017.

12 Assmann's theory can be followed through numerous publications since 1990 and found programmatic expression in Assmann 1996. See again Diesel 2006: 31–5. Diesel rightly observes that, whereas the distinction of 'primary' vs 'secondary' served Sundermeier to stress the *integration* of different types of religion within the experience of believers and their communities, Assmann used it to construe a dichotomy between two *mutually exclusive* types of religion.

13 See, e.g., the collected essays in Pongratz-Leisten 2011.

14 See especially the collected essays in Wagner 2006.

15 This is not the place to discuss the genealogy of axial age theory. The theorem as such was established by the philosopher Karl Jaspers in *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953; German original 1949), which was inspired by both Alfred and Max Weber. It was elevated to the status of a paradigm by historically minded sociologists pursuing the Weberian path, among whom Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Robert N. Bellah have been most influential. Recent adaptations to the history of religion\s include Torpey 2017; Sanderson 2018. For a recent assessment of the paradigm, see Mullins *et al.* 2018; regarding its intellectual genealogy and subsidiary function for theories on modernity, see now Assmann 2018.

16 Smith 1987 and 1990. For a retrospective view on the distinction, see Smith 2004: 14–19.

17 For important studies on the emergence and transformations of an inner self, see Assmann and Stroumsa 1999.

18 See Stroumsa 2016 and 2018.

19 On the question of faith in (Greek) religion, see Veyne 1988.

20 Lincoln 2004: 665. Emphasis added in order to do justice to an otherwise very suggestive essay, republished in 2012 as 'Ancient and post-ancient religions' in a volume of collected articles. Note Lincoln's observation that 'the transition from ancient to post-ancient might better be studied with reference to these four

variables, rather than the one which is their sum and product, "religion" *tout court*' (2004: 660).

21 Lincoln 2004: 659.

22 Lincoln is critically aware of this risk when he states as a provocative conclusion: 'The transition yields Christianity. Or, to put it a bit more cautiously, the ancient ends and the post-ancient begins with Christianity(ies), Judaism(s), and Islam(s), with the westernmost form of Christianity as the extreme case' (Lincoln 2004: 665).

23 Take, for instance, Lincoln's succinct but much more nuanced discussion of the transformative process which started from inspired oral poetry as the main source of expressing divine will and developed through written poetry or prose collected and edited in sacred books; once codified as canonical scripture, the written word replaced inspired speech, and displaced the divinatory process towards hermeneutics – a 'historic shift from a prophetic ethos associated with orality to the scholarly ethos of the text' (Lincoln 2004: 660–1).

24 See Leppin 2007. A similar case could be made for the history of Buddhism until its suppression on the Indian subcontinent, or for all missionising and expanding religions acculturating to newly encountered territories and societies.

25 See Frankfurter 2017; Leppin 2018; Brand 2019, among others.

26 To name but one compelling example, this has been amply demonstrated for Late Antique Egypt in Frankfurter 2017. Earlier scholarship may have considered the relevant materials in terms of 'survivals', which is definitely the wrong concept to make sense of what remained actual practices, both meaningful and habitual.

27 Lincoln 2004: 663 (emphasis added).

28 On material religion and mediation, see Meyer 2012, who may overstress (on Christian premises?) the aspect of 'generating presence' through material artefacts – a sometimes important but often quite irrelevant function of material artefacts in religious practice.

29 The latter argument had been most forcefully made in Knauf 1991; it has since become commonplace in critical historical scholarship.

30 A change from a biblical studies to a study of religion\s environment, which has had some epistemological consequences in my scholarly practice (see Uehlinger2015a and 2019).

31 See Keel 1993 (introductory volume) and 2017 (latest instalment, sites I–K). The project remains unfinished. Thanks to an SNSF Sinergia grant, which allows cooperation of scholars working at the universities of Bern, Tel Aviv and Zurich, we hope to bring it to completion (sites L–Z) and to transform it into an expandable, collaborative, open-access database by the end of 2023.

32 It is all the more surprising that the German version made it to a seventh printing as late as 2014, and the English translation of 1998 continues to be quoted as a standard reference. Alas, this also signals that no alternative account has been produced in the meantime by someone else, however necessary and welcome that would be. Note, however, the important work produced by Silvia Schroer (Schroer and Keel 2005; Schroer 2008, 2011, 2018), which has a much wider scope than *GGIG* both chronologically and geographically.

33 Contrast Uehlinger 1997 with Keel 2001 and 2012.

34 Uehlinger 2015b.

35 In line with ancient primary sources and a growing tendency in recent scholarship, I distinguish between the neighbouring populations and territories of ancient Israel and ancient Judah. Such a distinction also reflects in the Hebrew Bible, whose historiography, however, favours a pan-Israelite perspective largely governed by Judahite, even Jerusalemite, concerns. On the fundamental difference between 'ancient Israel', a modern scholarly construct (Davies 2015), 'Biblical Israel' (Davies 2015) and historical Israel and Judah, see Kratz 2015.

36 The problem is somewhat ill-defined in a recent contribution to this debate by Daniel Pioske (2019), who artificially opposes 'archaeology' and 'texts', an opposition he then wants to dissolve on very general hermeneutical grounds. Pioske's 'texts' include datable inscriptions and historiographic literature (or other genres of biblical literature) indiscriminately, without further differentiating their status as (primary, secondary, tertiary …) sources for the historian.

37 See especially Na'aman 2010, and the reply in Finkelstein 2010. On the latter's position at the time, see also Finkelstein 2011, whose subtitle provocatively paralleled 'archaeology and text' with 'reality and myth'. A few years later, the eminent archaeologist moved towards a kind of *via media* (see Finkelstein 2015). Today he has turned to resolutely engage with biblical literature (see n. 37).

38 See Finkelstein 2017a, 2017b and 2018 for recent examples.

39 See Grabbe 2018.

40 I still consider Knauf 1991 one of the clearest methodological expositions to that end.

41 See Römer 2018.

42 For instance Panofsky 1955: 26–41; and the recent translations (Panofsky 2008 and 2012) by Jaś Elsner and Katharina Lorenz of Panofsky's foundational 1925 and 1932 essays. Although Panofsky has been severely criticised and seems to have somewhat run out of steam in art history narrowly speaking, a glance through introductions and handbooks in visual culture studies demonstrates that wider and neighbouring fields continue to refer to his three-level methodological suggestions as an easy-to-handle orientation, if not an all-encompassing method (which Panofsky did not pretend it should be). That arguments developed in the 1920s and 1930s must be adapted and complemented a century later does not invalidate that foundation. See Uehlinger 2015a for further comments on this issue.

43 For an overview, both handy and suggestive, see Knappett 2005.

44 See Schmitt 2020 for the latest instalment, in an otherwise remarkable synthesis, of this framework.

45 Porzia 2018 criticises the model's pitfalls and weaknesses with special concern for Phoenicia, but his observations apply *mutatis mutandis* to the framework as such.

46 E.g. Holladay 1987 or Dever 2005.

47 The 'field' metaphor is indebted to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

48 Zevit 2001.

49 Zevit 2001: 15.

50 Hess 2007.

51 One should notice the emphasis on 'Israel' as an overarching classifier, in contrast to 'Israel and Judah' preferred in more recent scholarship.

52 Stavrakopoulou and Barton 2010. It is interesting to observe that, in this very useful edited volume, conventional ethno-'national' distinctions according to the various polities of the 1st-millennium southern Levant are conspicuously kept at the back and can only be scouted via the subject index.

53 Albertz and Schmitt 2012, ch. 4.

54 In his recent synthesis, Schmitt 2020 concentrates effectively on three levels (the family or household, the local, and the 'official', i.e. 'national' state), to which he occasionally adds practices related to work (production, profession), and sanctuaries of regional significance.

55 To which one may add self-critical reflection on the scholar's location, conceptual apparatus, etc. (see above).

56 Keel and Uehlinger 1992/1998, chap. VII.

57 E.g. Suter 2011.

58 See Nongbri 2008 and 2013. Nongbri's book has received mixed reactions in the religious studies community. Substantial reviews include Roubekas 2014 and Segal 2016; and see now Roubekas 2018 for different attempts at theorising ancient religion.

59 See also Barton and Boyarin 2017.

60 See Super and Turley 2006; Pitts and Versluys 2014; Humphries 2017; Woolf 2017.

61 For cautious remarks on 'religious mutations', see Pirenne-Delforge and Scheid 2013.

62 To give a single example for the contiguity of traditional village life, including religion, and new features related to relatively recent sectarian developments, I refer to the Leiden PhD thesis of Mattias Brand (2019) on the religious situation in 4th- to 5th-century CE Kellis; see Bagnall *et al.* 2015 and the extended review in Brand 2017.

63 As once more in Frankfurter 2019.

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Response to C. Uehlinger, 'Material Religion in Comparative Perspective: How Different Is BCE from CE?'

Stefanie Lenk

In asking 'How different is BCE from CE?', Christoph Uehlinger problematises the validity of a distinction that scholars of religion commonly make between two ideal types of religion. Uehlinger's compilation of oppositionals, extracted from 20th- and 21st-century writing on ancient religions, demonstrates the prevalence of this typological divide in our fields. Emphases differ (for example, 'traditional' versus 'revealed' or 'locative' versus 'utopian'), yet core characteristics of Type 1 religions (T1) and Type 2 religions (T2) are consistent. Uehlinger summarises T1 'as fully coextensive with social convention, if not "locally common-sense" altogether; as such it is transmitted and inherited from one generation to the next without too much questioning', and T2 'as fundamentally optional and oppositional, based on conviction and conversion, a choice to become a member in an elective community and to adopt belief in the truth of this group's particular myth and its superior potential for salvation' (p. 156).

While Uehlinger is not against using the T1-T2-typology as a heuristic device, he is sceptical of its value as a descriptive category in historical scholarship, for which he has ample justification. The idea that the T1-T2-typology can be projected onto a temporal frame is (as Uehlinger demonstrates) deeply engrained in current scholarship. T2 religions are commonly assumed to have supplanted T1 religions; oppositional pairs like 'primary' and 'secondary' religions, or 'ancient' and 'post-ancient', give vivid testimony of the typology's use as a template for historical development. The breaking point is most often located between BCE and CE – to put it bluntly, before and after the rise of Christianity. A text by Bruce Lincoln which seems to have nourished Uehlinger's concern, is particularly explicit about timing. Lincoln writes:

> Within such multistranded formations, one's neighbors were one's fellow citizens and also one's coreligionists, who spoke the same language, shared the same norms, celebrated the same festivals, and worshipped at the same altars, seeking favor of the same gods for the group of which they were all a part. The post-ancient, by contrast, saw the emergence of communities based primarily – also most explicitly and emphatically – in religious considerations, integrating persons which might well be divided by geography, language, culture, and/or citizenship. … Inclusion or exclusion in such amorphous communities was not ascribed by birth in a given place, lineage, or social stratum but had an elective quality.[1]

And a bit later: 'the transition yields Christianity. Or, to put things a bit more cautiously, the ancient ends and the post-ancient begins with Christianity(ies), Judaism(s), and Islam(s), with the westernmost form of Christianity as the extreme case.'[2]

Lincoln places much emphasis on the role of locality when he distinguishes T1 from T2. In contrast to T1, T2 is more concerned with integrating the likeminded, potentially from afar, than with making the religion work in its local context. He endorses a popular variety of the T1-T2-typology here, authored by Jonathan Z. Smith, which differentiates 'locative' T1 religions, dependent on and supportive of the given local customs, from 'utopian' T2 religions like Christianity which transcend local concerns or are even in opposition to them.[3] This is where Uehlinger objects, and

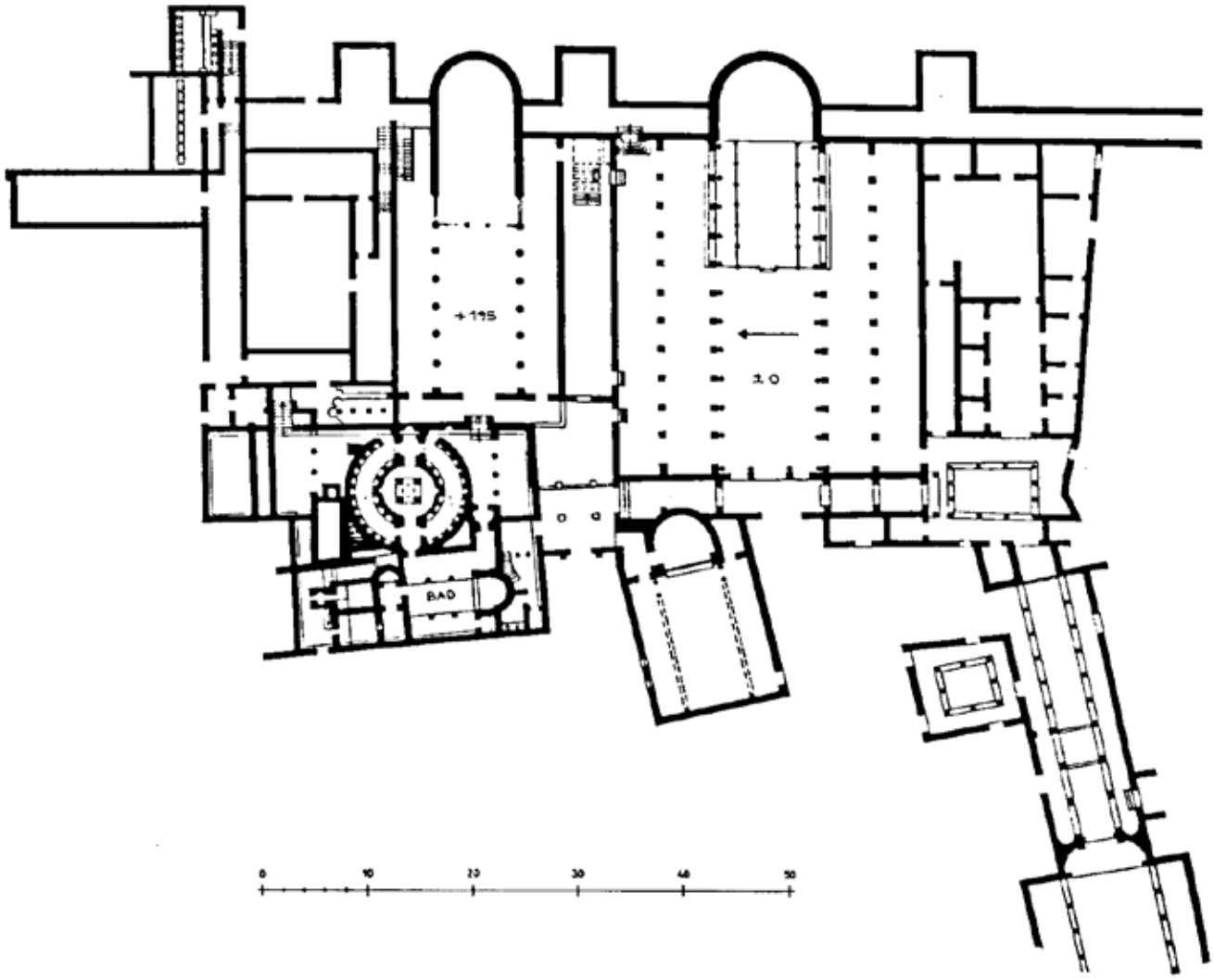

Plate 9.1 Ground plan of the church complex at Cuicul. Image: after Christern 1976: 138, fig. 27a

rightly so: 'much of CE religious practice remained essentially "locative": that is, centring on the local social fabric and the immediate everyday concerns for the prosperity of a local urban society or a village community, and the good life of its members' (p. 165). According to him, the central quality of T1 religions, their local horizon, remains more often than not central to T2 religions. Uehlinger's is a project to deconstruct the T1-T2 dichotomy, and respectively the BCE–CE dichotomy. In order to grasp 'locative' religious practice where religious discourse strives towards global uniformity, however, due consideration is needed for the lived reality of religious practitioners. Uehlinger touches here on a prime concern of the *Empires of Faith* project, as this is what makes the study of material culture such a crucial concern for historians of religion.

I would like to support Uehlinger's call for a more nuanced take on the impact of local customs on T2 religious formations by offering an example of religious material culture from a late antique Christian community in North Africa. The community resided in the city of Cuicul, modern Djémila (Algeria), in the first half of the 5th century. Located in the space and time of St Augustine, it surely epitomises what Lincoln called the 'westernmost form of Christianity'. Cuicul lay in the mountains of the Tell Atlas, a north-western area of ancient Numidia, on the route between Sitifis (Sétif) and Cirta (Costantine), and experienced a vivid phase of construction and restoration of public and private buildings in the 4th and 5th centuries. At this time, a substantial Christian complex in the southern district of the city was also developed.[4] The carefully planned complex consisted of two churches set parallel to each other, a chapel and a baptistery, as well as an entrance hall, alley, courtyards and living quarters (**Pl. 9.1**).

At first glance, the Christian complex fully qualifies as T2. When the Donatist controversy split the North African church in the 4th and 5th centuries, with so-called Donatists denying the efficacy of sacraments administered by priests who had collaborated with the Roman authorities under Diocletian's persecutions of Christians (303–5), Cuicul's Christian community took sides. The so-called Cresconius inscription, found in the choir of the south church, attests that the place was elevated to a memorial site for the rightful predecessors of the Catholic (that is anti-Donatist) Bishop Cresconius.[5] The inscription states further that the bishops' memorial was supposed to attract believers from afar: 'And from everywhere the Christians come together fulfilled by the wish to see themselves united in the praise of God ….'[6] Likely, a spectacular 90-metre-long subterranean

Plate 9.2 The baptistery at Cuicul, view from the adjacent bath complex. Image: Leschi 1953: 51

passageway connecting the two churches became the new location of the remains of the Catholic bishops.[7] The passageway also provided space for exclusion: the Donatist bishop attested in Cuicul was most likely not the target of commemoration.[8] We are in the middle of a T2 scenario in which taking sides in religious matters can be right and wrong, and religious leaders seek to gather the right sort of believers from far and wide.

A quintessential expression of a T2 ritual act is the rite of baptism. Baptism is the once-in-a-lifetime transition from the old, perilous life into the new Christian one; it is the 'death' and spiritual rebirth of the baptisand as a member of the body of Christ.[9] The baptisand is, so to speak, at a watershed moment. Baptism transforms the commitment to and ownership of Christ. In Augustine's time, the baptismal ceremony marked the transition from the catechumenate, the state of adhering to Christ, to the state of *fidelis*, the faithful.[10] According to the missionary logic of conversion, the sacrament of baptism is meant for everyone. In Cuicul's baptistery, we have one of the most elaborate and best-preserved baptisteries of North Africa (**Pl. 9.2**). It has received little scholarly attention since its excavation in 1922 owing to lack of archaeological investment in the site since Algerian independence. The circular, free-standing baptismal building consists of a baptismal chamber (**Pl. 9.3**) with a font covered by a canopy in its centre, and an ambulatory. The latter possibly served as waiting space for a maximum of 36 people, since semicircular niches fit for sitting are carved into its walls. The baptistery, monumental for North African standards, makes an apt component of a Christian district with pretensions to supra-regional importance.

Looking closer at the baptismal furnishings, however, the picture gets more complex. With respect to the ambitions behind the baptistery, we should expect the Christian mission to become manifest visually, the promise of a new Christian life to take shape. The opposite is the case. It seems that neither the walls nor the cupola of the baptistery were adorned.[11] The mosaic decoration of the baptismal floor, on the other hand, is bare of distinctly Christian symbols.[12] Rich aquatic scenery covers the floor of the central rotunda and the font within (**Pl. 9.4**). Besides many kinds of fish, one of them flying, the mosaic features a starfish, a winged insect, a seashell and a crustacean; the mosaicists evoked the entirety of aquatic life. A Christian interpretation as 'living water' is certainly possible, but was not made explicit by any means. Instead, the mosaicists employed visual expressions of plenty and prosperity that were totally habitual in late Roman North Africa, where scenes of marine life had commonly embellished Roman villas, fountains and baths for centuries.[13] Cuicul's preserved mosaics of profane spaces are a good example of this: aquatic subject matter outnumbers all other figurative themes depicted in private households.[14] The visual message was one of continuity, not of rupture. A reluctance to depict unequivocally Christian symbolism, let alone narrative, is, in fact, typical for the early church decorations of North Africa. Cuicul's baptistery shares this feature with the mosaics of the adjacent double church, but also with some of the largest episcopal churches, such as those at Hippo Regius, Dermech in Carthage, Timgad and Tebessa.[15]

Christians in Cuicul were assured of their unbroken connection with local custom and practice not only visually, but also ritually. The cleansing from all sins in the baptismal

Plate 9.3 The interior of the baptismal chamber at Cuicul, view from the adjacent bath complex. Image: photograph by the author

Plate 9.4 Detail of the mosaic floor south of the font. Image: photograph by the author

font was followed by anointing with oil and the imposition of hands by the celebrant. With this last rite, the Holy Spirit was conferred.[16] In Cuicul, a fitting place for this would have been the apsidiole at the font's exit (**Pl. 9.3**).[17] Important to us is what lay behind the baptisands at this point in the ceremony. At the opposite end to the font, a prominent portal leads into a small but fully furnished bath complex (**Pls 9.2, 9.5**).[18] The Great Bath of Cuicul is only a few minutes away, which begs the question why a separate Christian bath was needed here. Reasons of piety and practicality come to mind, yet the one occasion safely attested by a contemporary, on which the bath most likely

Plate 9.5 3D-model of the baptistery and the adjacent bath at Cuicul. Image provided by Zamani, Cultural Heritage Documentation Project, University of Cape Town

would have been used, relates to baptism itself. Augustine writes to Januarius (*c.* 400 CE) on the regional practice of bathing on Maundy Thursday:

> many or almost all persons in many places were in the habit of bathing on that day. … If you ask how the custom of bathing arose, no more reasonable explanation occurs to me than that the bodies of those to be baptized had become foul during the observance of Lent, and they would be offensive if they came to the font without bathing on some previous day. This day was especially chosen for it, on which the Lord's Supper is annually commemorated, and, because it was permitted for those about to be baptized, many others wished to join with them in bathing and relaxing the fast.[19]

Augustine reports that the bathing praxis was firmly integrated in the Lenten period, in which neophytes prepared for baptism. During Lent, they abstained from eating meat, drinking wine, engaging in sexual relations, attending the theatre and visiting the public baths, as well as going through a series of purifications such as exorcisms and catechetical lessons.[20] Although the Church's Lenten calendar did not prescribe the pre-baptismal bathing on Maundy Thursday, neophytes commonly practised it and were joined by friends and family. The significant number of baptismal bath annexes excavated in North Africa can only be read as confirmatory evidence.[21]

Was pre-baptismal bathing for Augustine's contemporaries actually purely practical, as he makes it sound? Let us think back to the prominent portal leading from the baptismal rotunda directly into the bath complex in Cuicul (**Pl. 9.3**). What was this entrance for? Two direct entrances led into the baptistery opposite the smaller of the two churches, and two different entrances gave access to the bath complex (**Pl. 9.1**). Why would the architects have wanted to provide direct access between bath and baptismal chamber? Why would they have sought to create a visual link between the bathing fonts and the 'well of life', if it had not been to factor pre-baptismal purification into the preparatory rites towards baptism? The spatial solution indicates that Cuicul's Christian community saw a need for purification before the performance of the sacrament – even if it was the ultimate rite of purification. Pre-baptismal purification is thus difficult to bring in line with Christian theology. The observance of local convention and tradition, however, explains the close link between baptistery and bath. Preliminary purification by washing belonged to the standard practices of much of Roman religious worship – be it in civic temples or in healing or oracular sanctuaries, whether in mystery religions like Mithras worship or in magical practices.[22] The pre-baptismal bathing custom thus indicates the community's indebtedness to local ritual practice and the wish to maintain elements of this tradition in their religious life as Christians.

The lived religious practice of Cuicul's Christian community can neither be described 'as fundamentally optional and oppositional' (T2) nor 'as fully coextensive with social convention' (T1). As Uehlinger has lucidly argued, religious reality is much more likely to consist, to a varying degree, of opposites, but to see this we are required to closely observe local material culture.

Notes

1 Lincoln 2012: 79–80.
2 Lincoln 2012: 82.
3 Smith 1978.
4 Blanchard-Lemée 1975; Février 1996; Blas de Robleès and Sintès 2003: 89–124; Sears 2007. For the minority opinion that part or all of the Christian complex is Justinianic, see Février 1996 and Strube 1996.
5 Christern 1976: 253–4. See also Grabar 1946: 448–50.
6 Pflaum and Dupuis 2003: 873, no. 8299.
7 For a discussion of the Cresconius inscription and the crypts located in the passageway, see Christern 1976: 140–4. The previous location of the bishops' tombs is unclear.
8 For the Donatist bishop of Djémila, see Lancel 1974: 12.1.
9 Romans 6:1–14.
10 Aasgaard 2011; Burns and Jensen 2014: 203.
11 The walls were covered only with plaster. See Monceaux 1922: 404. The excavators left no record about any fragments of a potential mosaic or painted decoration of the cupola. See also Ballu 1921 and 1923; Monceaux 1923.
12 A small swastika on the mosaic floor of the baptismal font is a 20th-century addition. For the original state at the time of the excavation, see Monceaux 1923: 107, no. 21.
13 Dunbabin 1978: 125–30; Smati 2000.
14 Blanchard-Lemée 1975.
15 Dunbabin 1978: 188.
16 Burns and Jensen 2014: 202.
17 The reading direction of an inscription on the floor of the baptismal font prescribes the likely directions of entering and leaving the font. For the inscription, see Monceaux 1923: 107, no. 21.
18 Thébert 2003: 203; Ballu 1923: 22–3.
19 Augustine, *Epistles*, 54.7.9–10 (Augustine 2008: 259).
20 Burns and Jensen 2014: 205–6.
21 Annexed baths are also documented in Tipasa and in the Donatist church of Timgad. Similar complexes have been suggested for Hippo, Rusguniae, Bulla Regia and Sbeitla II. See Thébert 2003: 226–7 and 252–3; and, further, Leglay 1957: 706; Lassus 1965: 597-8 and 1970: 251; Duval 1989: 389.
22 Hellholm 2011, 41–154.

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